

EUGENICS AND SOCIALISM

Their Common Ground and How it Should be Sought

By HERBERT BREWER

THE success of eugenics necessarily depends upon the degree to which it is able to influence, directly or indirectly, the mass of the population. Whatever may be one's opinions as to the validity of socialist ideas, it cannot be disputed that in relation to the largest section of the population they are always powerful and often dominant. That the wage earners, through trade unions and co-operative societies as well as through political organizations, are so largely under socialist leadership, makes it important to take into consideration the psychology of the socialistically-minded in undertaking the task of enlightening the public at large upon matters of eugenics.

In some quarters, it is believed that the socialist and the eugenic philosophy are fundamentally opposed. If that view were correct, the outlook for eugenics, in a world where the drive of egalitarian democracy is so potent a force, would not be promising. The writer believes, on the contrary, that the socialist and the eugenic outlook are far from incompatible. It cannot be denied, however, that in the main the socialist attitude to-day is negligent or mistrustful of eugenics. Medical and other representatives of the socialist movement who have denounced sterilization of the feeble-minded as degrading, cruel, and subversive of working-class interests, probably speak for a large number of followers.

There is reason for thinking that this obtuseness to eugenic considerations on the part of the political 'left' largely arises from adventitious and avoidable causes.

It is natural that the social reformer, pre-occupied with pressing environmental evils, should tend to overlook the deeper seated and more stubborn factors which lie in humanity itself. But there appears no

essential reason why both aspects should not ultimately be regarded and reconciled. Stock raisers devote close attention to the pedigree of their animals, while neglecting no point connected with feeding, shelter, and veterinary care. There is no *a priori* reason why radical reform in raising the standard of life of the masses should make improvement in their hereditary quality impossible. Indeed, to the extent that an understanding of eugenic aims is advanced by more education, leisure, and culture, a higher general standard of living will facilitate success. Moreover, the socialist is bound to admit that the organized society he proposes would require a higher level of intellectual and moral capacity than does the existing order. Measures tending to raise the innate bases of such capacity must therefore tend to improve the chances of a socialist community working successfully.

LABOUR AND BIRTH CONTROL

The support that has been given by socialists to birth control, though it has not been prompted by definitely eugenic considerations, has been of considerable value to eugenics. The late Labour Minister of Health took a bold and important step in authorizing contraceptive advice for mothers attending welfare clinics in cases where the health of the mother would be endangered by further pregnancy. Whatever be the interpretation given to the qualification of health reasons, it is probable that such reasons will often coincide with eugenic indications. In principle the change is highly significant; for it involves the admission by the State that conception can, and sometimes ought, to be prevented. When Labour is thus tending, unavowedly but perceptibly, in a eugenic direction, the time would seem opportune for cultivating

among its supporters a more conscious and thoroughgoing support.

The *Eugenics Society* is rightly dissociated from political affiliations. I do not suggest that it should seek them, nor that it should not criticize a socialist government as freely as any other. What I do suggest is that it should find more room in its propaganda for arguments and appeals calculated to carry conviction to people influenced by socialist fallacies—or, if you will, by socialist truths.

"The majority of Englishmen," said Eleanor Rathbone, "whatever their class and politics, have intensely conservative minds, and are influenced greatly by tradition and the phrases in which tradition has clothed itself. A proposal to which they may take an unconquerable aversion if they meet it clad in phrases which are repugnant to an already established prejudice may be received with acclamation if it can manage to enlist in its service the particular set of catchwords, which happen at the moment to be in favour with the particular set of individuals one is addressing."*

CLASS DIFFERENCES

It is not necessary to believe that socialists are more under the sway of catchwords than other people, to regard that statement as possessing much relevance to the present question. But there remain some differences between socialist and eugenic tendencies which cannot be approximated by a mere exercise of tactful phraseology.

An influential school of eugenic thought takes the view that material success in the existing economic system is significantly identified with superior hereditary ability, and holds that the eugenic problem may be formulated as one of increasing the fertility of the well-to-do, and of checking that of the less prosperous classes. The means proposed to this end involve preserving or increasing the material advantages of the well-to-do over the poorer classes, by a

policy of taxation and social reform which would slow down or reverse those legislative tendencies which have been so distinctive a feature of the past few generations. Those tendencies, which all parties have in different measure advanced, the socialist would carry much farther. The socialist induction, drawn from another body of data, would indeed have it that the present marked inequalities of income are not only morally unjustifiable, but are productive of economic disorder and of the many-sided evils of poverty.

I will not attempt to discuss whether the formulation of the eugenic problem to which I have referred is intrinsically sound. It may be stated, however, that it has been severely criticized by biologists of the standing of Jennings, Haldane (J. B. S.), and Hogben. Whatever its validity, it would appear to be incompatible with socialist methods and objectives. That does not dispose of the question of whether socialism can march with eugenics. There may be methods of approach other than those to which the socialist takes objection.

If we suppose a classless society where economic advantages are substantially equalized, can we point to motives for eugenic improvement which will still exist in sufficient strength to serve as engines of progress? If we can, then the disputable eugenic proposals here in review need not stand as insuperable obstacles to a *modus vivendi*.

THE HUMANITARIAN ARGUMENT

In truth, eugenics can call upon motives immensely more broad and deep than are evoked by schemes which follow the contours of class egotisms. Rich or poor, humble or exalted, whether under a capitalist or a socialist order, one overwhelming reason applies universally in favour of everyone being born with a good hereditary endowment. This reason is that without good heredity, a life worth living for the individual is all but impossible. Good health, constitutional soundness, longevity, high vitality and intelligence—these are goods which every rational being

* *The Disinherited Family*, p. 265.

ought to regard as paramount. These qualities should be praised as the most valuable ingredients of the good life, apart altogether from the material gain they may bring. Just as the most powerful reason for being well born is that life may be worth living, so the compelling consideration for stopping the procreation of unfitness is that being ill-born means to endure suffering and degradation. Not economy, but humanity, is the decisive reason why the multiplication of the feeble-minded should be arrested. The poor, no less than the rich, the socialist no less than the conservative, has reason for desiring that either they shall have children well-born or else no children at all.

To enlist a generous humanitarianism in the service of eugenics is to make economic sanctions largely irrelevant. A eugenic policy conceived in such a spirit is best calculated to smooth the formidable difficulties which stand in the way of persuading hereditary unfitness to extinguish itself. Disinterested humanity and pity are credentials, armed with which eugenics can with confidence deliver its message to individuals of every class and creed. When it comes to do so, widely, persistently, and devotedly, among those in whom it awakens responsive convictions will surely be a great number of those who call themselves socialists.

